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The influence of subliminal crosstalk in dementia narratives

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Abstract

Ethnographic audio-visual research data recorded in a busy dementia care environment were initially considered to be 'contaminated' by unwanted background noise. This included a variety of elements: ambient sound, mechanical noise, non-narrative vocalisation and narrative fragments from parallel conversation. Using the methodological lens of conversation analysis, we present an exploration of the striking temporal and sequential resonances between the narrative of one man with dementia and a group of care staff holding a separate conversation some distance away. We suggest that in this and similar settings, where random and intrusive background sounds and conversation form a ubiquitous backdrop, the presence of such 'noise' can have a detectable influence on the content and direction of situated narratives. We argue that rather than attempting to filter out these apparently intrusive sounds from micro-interactional data, interference elements can usefully be incorporated into the analysis of interactions.

When Keywords: Conversation analysis; background noise; narrative development; dementia.

Introduction

In this article we present conversation analysis (CA) focusing on aspects of a single extended interaction between researchers and a person attending a dementia day care centre. The interaction was recorded as part of a recently completed ethnographic study that aimed to compile a film record of people with dementia engaged in various activities. The filmed material was intended to model ways of promoting communication and reducing social exclusion for practitioner-students in Dementia Studies (Capstick et al 2015). One element of the project involved capturing informal conversations between members of the research team and people attending the day centre in order to elicit their personal narratives. However, a significant and re-occurring problem in obtaining data usable for educational purposes was the consistently high level of background noise in the environment where our interactions took place.

From a technical perspective, capturing audio and video data in crowded or noisy fieldwork environments is never easy. There can be innumerable variables, ranging from theoretical concerns about researcher gaze, down to practical issues such as where to position equipment so that recordings are as clear as possible. This is obviously a greater concern if the data is to be used – as was ours – for linguistic and micro-interactional analysis. Unlike some day centres that cater for people with dementia, this one had a lively and vibrant atmosphere – particularly in the large communal area where we conducted much of our fieldwork. Ironically, although stimulating for the people who used the day centre, this routinely chaotic environment caused us considerable difficulty when trying to capture one-to-one interactions that were clear of intrusive background noise – particularly loud voices from other nearby conversations. Initially, we considered many of our disappointingly ‘contaminated’ recordings to be unusable. However, during the process of attempting to clean up and extract serviceable audio it became apparent that elements that we initially regarded merely as annoying extraneous noise, occasionally turned out to have a peculiar resonance with our primary data.

In this article we therefore discuss hidden micro-interactional relationships that were discovered by analysing the interplay between our primary data source and ‘noise’ interactions occurring nearby. Elements of this corpus have been analysed elsewhere in the context of socio-cultural resistance in people with dementia (see: Capstick and Chatwin, 2016). Here, however, we focus specifically on a micro-interactional analysis that actively incorporates external noise elements, as a form of interlocutor, to reveal elements of subliminal co-construction that would not otherwise be evident. What we are basically concerned with then, from an interactional perspective, are variants of multi-party interaction; interactions involving more than two interlocutors (Shriberg *et al*, 2001; Pallotti, 2001; Glenn, 1989). A novel feature of the data we present here is that one of the multi-party elements in this field of audio production is an unintended consequence of the interactional environment (i.e. the lounge area in a noisy day centre). This element will be

termed 'crosstalk'. Crosstalk is usually to be avoided, and simply refers to signals from different sources that unintentionally interact with one another to cause unwanted effects (see, for example, Kim et al, 2007; Wrigley et al, 2005). In this analysis, rather than trying to avoid the effects of crosstalk, we actively seek them out.

Methods

Our methodological approach is based in the conventions of conversation analysis (CA). CA is largely concerned with the analysis of the verbal communicative practices that people routinely use when they interact with one another. Utilising video and audio recordings of naturally occurring interaction, a highly detailed method of transcription is designed to capture the minutiae of speech, including aspects of non-verbal behaviour (see box 1). In its pure form, CA provides an analytical tool that can expose the underlying structural 'rules' governing the ways activities are composed and organised (Drew et al, 2001). At a basic level, CA is particularly suited to revealing the relative temporal and sequential relationships between interlocutors as they interact with one another – a feature that is key to revealing the phenomena we describe here.

CA has been used in a wide variety of settings, with medical and health related areas being particularly well represented. It has, for example, been applied to primary care interactions (Mangione-Smith et al, 2003; Heritage & Stivers, 1999; Heath, 1995) health visiting (Heritage & Sefi, 1995); counselling, (Perakyla, 1995); mental health and specialist neurological consultations (Plug & Reuber, 2007) and complementary and alternative medicine consultations in a variety of therapeutic modalities (Ruusuvuori and Lindfors, 2008; Chatwin, 2009, 2008; Ruusuvuori, 2005a, 2005b). With specific focus on the micro-interactional characteristics of dementia-related interaction, Watson (1999) described aspects of trouble-indicating behaviour and repair strategies in conversations between people with dementia and family members. More recently, work by Blackburn et al (2015), and Jones et al (2015), has outlined the use of socio-linguistic cues to aid interactional profiling and diagnostic processes.

Our analysis is also grounded in research that has sought to understand the wider social implications of communication and interaction in dementia care settings. Research utilising broader discourse based approaches, for example, is fairly well represented, even though the field in general currently receives significantly less attention than many other areas of health and social care. Relevant studies include early work by Cohen-Mansfield & Werner (Cohen-Mansfield & Werner, 1997) who examined, what they termed at the time, as the management of verbally disruptive behaviours in nursing home residents; Åkerström (2002), who described the way in which talk about aggressive patients was formulated in a particular way among workers in a nursing home, and Ward et al (2008), who utilised video and ethnographic observation to capture the interactional dynamics of the care home.

At an organisational level, recent work by Kontos et al (2011) highlighted the need to understand interrelations between care home workers and their supervisors, and several studies also employing observational and ethnographic approaches have focused on aspects of daily living in care homes. These have included levels of engagement, activity and communication (see: Schreiner et al, 2005; Nolan et al, 1995; Bowie and Mountain, 1993; Gilloran et al, 1993; Hallbiorg et al, 1990). Studies have also addressed the dynamics developing between carers and care home residents, and have shown a disparity between the socially-oriented interests of residents and the task-based agenda of the care staff (Bender and Cheston, 1997; Iwaisiw and Olson, 1995). Similarly, the content and context of caring encounters have been explored in studies by those such as Coupland et al (1998) and Lancy (1985).

The data

In the session that forms the basis of this article, we examine extracts from a fieldwork recording of an interaction between a member of the day centre (Don), and two researchers. When the interaction took place, the day centre lounge was particularly noisy, making clear sound recording extremely difficult. Multiple interactions were occurring between staff and residents in the room and, of most relevance to this article, among a group of three care staff in an adjoining kitchen area. In each of our extracts, we have used a simplified version of the notation system developed for CA (Sacks and Jefferson, 1995). An important feature of this system is that it allows the various simultaneous strands of conversation and ambient noise to be presented in a way that reflects their relative temporal placement; the square brackets ([]) in the text indicate points at which different layers of talk and/or noise overlap (a complete list of the symbols used is given in Box 1). In addition to Don, the participants are the three members of day centre staff (CS1, CS2 and CS3) and one researcher (Res). A second member of the research team was present, filming the encounter, but was not directly involved in the interaction.

In the analysis that follows, we focus on three discrete sequences of interaction. However, for clarity, we provide three data extracts for each sequence: the first being 'clean' in that it contains only details pertaining to our primary data – the interaction between Don and the researcher. The second includes only the 'noise' data (primarily the external talk generated by the carers in the nearby kitchen area). The third version of each sequence includes both interactions superimposed upon one another, and establishes the temporal relationships between them.

Don's narrative

Like many people with dementia Don has difficulties with short-term recall, and his speech was sometimes repetitive; his long term memory is good, and is keen to talk about his wartime experiences, even though not all of his memories of that time in his life are happy

ones. Like the three men with dementia whose wartime narratives are discussed by Capstick and Clegg (2013) Don talk in a frank and revealing way about his time on fuel supply with the RAF, with an emphasis on the subjective domain and personal lived experience. Don volunteered to join the RAF at the age of 17, and worked in a variety of war zones, including the Middle East, throughout the duration of the Second World War. In our first extract he is describing his demobilisation:

Extract 1.1 (Don's narrative)

1. Don: I don't know. I got demobbed from Germany. I got invited up to the Wing
2. Commander's office quarters and he said to me would I like to sign on?
3. He said, 'If you sign on you'll be a sergeant tomorrow (.) I said, 'That's what you
4. think, sir. I want to go home to my family. I've done my whack.'
- 5 (3.0) I lost a lot of mates

Don's monologue here makes sense in its own right, as a discrete narrative. It stands as a self-contained sub-sequence which fits coherently within the much longer war narrative he had been delivering in his prior talk. In lines 1, 2 and 4, he describes arriving back from Germany and being offered a commission – which he immediately rejects. His final turn (line 5) comes after an extended (3 second) pause, which helps to convey the reflective quality of what he is saying.

If we switch to the parallel extract involving only the care staff:

Extract 1.2 (Care staff narrative)

- 1 CS2: Is it permanent? Or is it agency this time?
- 2 CS3: 'Cos one night I'll work, I'll be off Monday. . .
- 3 CS1: Would you travel anywhere? If I says to you, do you wanna come and stay
- 4 with me, you'd do it?
- 5 (0.5)
- 6 CS1: If I said I were gonna take you to ...Egypt?

We can see immediately that this sequence is thematically similar to Don's. The participants CS1, CS2 and CS3 have been discussing working hours, and the difficulties of travelling to work (from line 1: 'Is it permanent?'). There is also the suggestion of reunion, and friendship ties: 'Would you travel anywhere? If I says to you, do you wanna come and stay with me, you'd do it?' (lines 3 and 4). On line 6, CS1 jokingly evokes exotic and foreign locations as destinations that might be just too far to travel for a job. So we have two separate and simultaneously occurring sequences that are thematically similar and make reasonable sense when taken as individual interactions. They have what we have described elsewhere as 'thematic resonance' (Capstick and Chatwin, 2016). Even more interesting, however, is

what is revealed when both sequences are arranged synchronically to display their temporal relationship:

Extract 1.3 (Combined narrative)

1. Don: I don't know. I got demobbed from Germany. I got invited up to the wing
2. Commander's office quarters [and he said to me would I like to sign on?
3. CA2: [Is it permanent? Or is it agency this time?
4. Don: He said if you sign on you'll be a sergeant tomorrow (.). I said that's what you
5. think, sir. I want to go home to my family. I've done my whack.
6. CA3: Cos one night I'll work, I'll be off Monday. . .
7. CA1: Would you travel anywhere? If I says to you, do you wanna come and stay
8. with me, you'd do it?
9. Don: I lost a lot of [mates
10. CA1: [If I said I were gonna take you to ...Egypt?

On line 3, it can be seen that CS2 produces his turn 'is it permanent? Or is it agency this time?' At the same instant as Don completes his turn: '. . and he said to me would I like to sign on' (line 2). This has not only a thematic similarity – they are both talking about job offers – the resonance goes further: CS2s turn on line 3, and the staff turns that follow are so closely aligned with Don's narrative turns, that they effectively set up a cogent action-narration relationship to one another. If we stand back from the data and imagine this as a theatrical performance, with the care staff interaction as the visual focus (as if they were the actors performing a scene), Don's turns take on the function of narration. It is as if, in their independent sequence of turns at talk they present a tangential interpretation of what Don is saying. The effect is authentically surreal, going beyond the simple juxtaposition of random words or images because of the underlying thematic bond.

In extract 4 (below) Don resumes his wartime narrative. In the section transcribed here, he is describing how the RAF learned to intercept and shoot down flying bombs that were sent over from Germany - 'kites' being slang for British fighters.

Extract 2.1 (Don's narrative)

- 1 Don: I was there when the V bombs were coming over us.
- 2 And the kites were chasing them.
- 3 Before they got to London, they shot them down.
- 4 Res: Didn't they flip them over with their wings?
- 5 Don: Sometimes, yea, they could do but I wasn't there then. I don't remember
- 6 that. (1.5) I was never still. (1.0) See I was in transport and I was all
- 7 over. I drove. . . .

8 ((Approximately two minutes of
 9 relatively unbroken narrative in which Tom talks
 10 about his experience of driving a field ambulance
 11 from Hamburg to Arnhem.))
 12 . . . and Montgomery came back. I was with Montgomery in the
 13 Middle East. Spitfires and . . (1.5) It all seems like a dream
 14 for me now, like, you know what I mean?

In the corresponding staff interaction or 'noise' sequence, the action is relatively short, and confined to two specific places - one which coincides with the beginning of Don's narrative, and one towards the end. Both of the sequences take an overtly military tone: on line 2, CS2 overlaps CS1 with 'Soldier!', followed by imitation gun fire (line 4). On line 7, there is the phrase: 'When you carry a gun, you are fighting a war.'

Extract 2.2 (Care staff narrative)

1 CS1: Oh sorr[y!
 2 CS2: [Soldier!
 3 (1.0)
 4 CS1: Bang!-bang!-bang!-bang! -bang!!
 5 ((approximately 2 minutes undifferentiated kitchen sounds))
 6 CS1: Ahh, that's what that was.
 7 CS2: When you carry a gun, you are fighting
 8 a war.

Extract 2.3 (combined narrative)

1 Don: I was there when the V bombs were coming over us.
 2 And the kites were chasing them.
 3 Before they got to London, they shot them down.
 4 Res2: Didn't they flip them over with their wings?
 5 Don: Sometimes, yea, they could do but I wasn't there then.
 6 I don't remember that.
 7 CS1: Oh sorr[y!
 8 CS2: [Soldier!
 9 Don: I was never still.
 10 CS1: Bang!-bang!-bang!-bang! -bang!!
 11 Don: See I was in transport and I was all over.
 12 I drove. . . ((Approximately two minutes of
 13 relatively unbroken narrative in which Tom talks
 14 about his experience of driving a field ambulance
 15 from Hamburg to Arnhem.))
 16 . . . and Montgomery came back. I was with Montgomery in the
 17 Middle East. Spitfires [and. . .
 18 CS1: [Ahh, that's what that was.
 19 CS2: When you carry a gun, you are fighting
 20 a [war.
 20 Don: [It all seems like a dream for me now, like,

The juxtaposition of military metaphors between the simultaneous interactions here is particularly fascinating. Whilst we do not wish to impose any determinate meaning on this material, it does appear to add to our growing awareness of the complex and multifaceted ‘meanings of noise’ in dementia care environments. We cannot know the degree to which the care staff unconsciously appropriated thematic elements from what Don was saying. They would, however, already have been aware that he liked to talk about his wartime experiences. They were almost certainly familiar, too, with the general nature of his story, and they could probably anticipate what he was to the researcher talking about. Nevertheless, the thematic similarities and temporal synchronicity here are remarkable. Not only does carer 2 make explicit reference to a ‘soldier!’ (line 6), but carer 2 actually imitates gunfire (line 8) and then delivers the line ‘When you carry a gun, you are fighting a war’ (line 13), which is overlapped by Don declaring that ‘It all seems like a dream to me now. . .’ (lines 20-21).

Our final extract (below) offers another example of overt thematic resonance:

Extract 3.1 (Don's narrative)

- 1 Don: And we got married in 47 (1.0) Bank holiday 47 (1.0) And Ella's
- 2 uncle was chief engineer for FDF film transport (1.0) And he
- 3 asked me if I wanted a position in there (1.0) And I grabbed it
- 4 with open arms and said, 'Oh yes, please!' (1.5) And Ella and me
- 5 got married in 47, and we moved here in 47.

Extract 3.2 (care staff narrative)

- 1 CS1: I wouldn't want somebody that – to the stage when things get uncomfortable.
- 2 So we'd better wait- I wouldn't want somebody to have a bad night with me.
- 3 (1.0)
- 4 CS1: Still trying- (.) but when you're with somebody for so many years
- 5 (.) man. It happens to a lot of people, you know how the situation is now.
- 6 (1.0)
- 7 CS1: You know when you've been married or been together
- 8 for a long time, and you get to like 70 years and then . . .

Extract 3.3 (combined narrative)

- 1 Don: And we got married in 47.
- 2 CS1: I wouldn't want somebody that – to the stage when things get uncomfortable.
- 3 Don: Bank holiday [47.
- 4 CS1: [So we'd better wait- I wouldn't want somebody to have

data illustrate that this impact may not simply be disruptive. In the case of Don, for example, the crosstalk between his narrative and that of the care staff serves to generate a layer of interaction (and meaning) which, while it may be largely subliminal, can still be directly observed. Whilst our initial interpretation was that Don struggled to be heard and had to compete with the staff for attention, for example, an alternative possibility now presents itself. That is, that Don's story had already permeated and interpenetrated talk within the care environment to such an extent that it was shaping the staff's communication with each other. There is a strong possibility, also, that the care staff - being used to Tom's story, and anticipating what he would be telling the researchers, perhaps also feeling excluded from the film-making process - are establishing their own right to possess a narrative and to have their voices heard. The study of 'crosstalk' can therefore help to provide a deeper understanding of how micro-interactions may be co-constructed in care environments. We would suggest that a more detailed study of narrative production in different dementia environments, and with groups of people occupying different positions in their internal hierarchies could provide further insight into such phenomena, and also into organisational cultures.

Box 1

Simplified CA transcription symbols

In CA, punctuation symbols such as full stops, commas and question marks etc., are used to denote the characteristics of ongoing speech and do not necessarily maintain a conventional grammatical function. The examples in this article have been simplified for clarity, but the meanings of the symbols that have been used are:

- . - full stops are used to indicating a falling intonation.
- , - commas indicate continuing intonation.
- (0.5) - numbers within brackets indicate timings in whole and tenths of a second.
- (.) - a full stop within brackets indicates a 'micro pause' of less than two tenths of a second.
- [- Square brackets are used to denote overlapping speech, so if, as is common in conversational speech, one person anticipates how the other's turn will end and begins their turn before it is fully complete, the transcript would look like this:

Don: And he asked me if I wanted a position [here
 CS1: [But when you're with somebody. . .

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